Emotional Intractability:
The Effects of Perceptions of Emotional Roles on
Immediate and Delayed Conflict Outcomes

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Introduction

The growing field of intractable conflict studies is currently engaged in an important inquiry to understand why and how intractable conflict occurs. For example, we seek to know why some conflicts become intractable while others do not, and when they do become intractable, we seek to understand the variety of mechanisms by which intractablity occurs. While answers to this inquiry are likely to be quite expansive and complex and are just beginning to be explored in the literature (for example, see Coleman, 2003; Kriesberg, 2005), this extended abstract proposes that an essential step in investigating the nature of intractable conflict is to understand the role that intense emotions, such as humiliation, play in perpetuating the cycles of violence. Scholars and practitioners (e.g., Crocker, Hampson & Aall, 2004; Lindner, 2002; Coleman, 2003; Friedman, 2003) have identified humiliation as among the central emotions experienced by those in intractable conflict situations. However, while a number of scholars and practitioners have identified emotions as central to the problem of intractable conflict, relatively little theoretical and empirical work has been conducted on the role that emotions (especially humiliation) play in conflict situations (Barry and Oliver, 1996; Hartling and Luchetta, 1999; Lindner, 2002).

In this extended abstract, we describe two empirical studies designed to explore the role that emotions play in perpetuating conflict, using humiliation as a case example. We contend that the ways in which emotions are socially constructed affects how emotions are experienced, acted upon, and recalled, and that these experiences, actions and recollections directly influence the degree to which conflicts escalate and become

stuck in cycles of violence. In this paper, we seek to shed light more specifically on why and how this is so.

This extended abstract has five sections. The first and second sections offer definitions of intractable conflict and humiliation, respectively. The third section offers an overview of the social construction of emotions and how it is thought to influence behavior. The fourth section outlines relevant research on the "culture of honor" and how the social construction of honor codes influences behavior. The fifth section explores how emotions are recalled, and the role that rumination about a humiliating experience plays in perpetuating conflict dynamics. The abstract concludes with an overview of the methods currently being used to conduct and collect and analyze data in two research studies, one correlational, the other experimental, designed to explore the role of humiliation in intractable conflict.

Intractable Conflict

In order to describe the relationship between emotions and intractable conflict, a basic definition of intractable conflict is needed. Intractable conflicts are those that stubbornly persist despite continued attempts at resolution. The dictionary definition of "intractable" is "not easily governed, managed or directed; not easily manipulated or wrought; not easily relieved or cured" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2005). Intractable conflicts can be broadly defined by three overarching characteristics. First, intractable conflicts are protracted; that is, they persist over a long period of time. In other words, they are characterized by long-standing conflict that manifests itself in cyclical patterns, with frequent bursts of violence juxtaposed with periods of relative quiet as conflict brews beneath the surface (Putnam & Wondolleck, 2003; Coleman, 2000). Second, they

are waged in ways that the adversaries themselves or third parties perceive to be destructive, such as by bearing devastating financial costs as well as extremely traumatic physical and emotional consequences. Third, they continue despite repeated attempts by third parties to resolve or transform them (Kreisberg, 2005).

Humiliation

Humiliation is a significant emotion experienced by those in intractable conflict situations and has been understood to play a central role in perpetuating conflict systems (Crocker, Hampson & Aall, 2004; Lindner, 2002; Coleman, 2003). Thus, before discussing further the role of humiliation in intractable conflict, background on humiliation and a proposed definition are provided.

Researchers have traditionally paid little attention to the role that emotions in general play in conflict (Barry & Oliver, 1996). In particular, compared with emotions such as shame and embarrassment, research on the emotion of humiliation has been conducted much less frequently (Lindner, 2002). When it has been examined, the constructs of shame, embarrassment and humiliation have often been used interchangeably (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Lindner, 2002), making it difficult to identify the defining qualities of humiliation as opposed to other related emotions. In addition, while the role that humiliation plays in conflict has received some attention in qualitative research investigations as well as in the popular media (see Lindner, 2002; Friedman, 2003; Filkins, 2004; Sharkey, 2004), very few quantitative empirical studies on humiliation and conflict have been published in the social psychology or related literatures (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999).

Upon a review of existing definitions of humiliation in the literature, we define

humiliation in this extended abstract as *an emotion, triggered by public events, which evokes a sense of inferiority resulting from the realization that one is being, or has been, treated in a way that departs from the normal expectations for fair and equal human treatment. The experience of humiliation has the potential to serve as a formative, guiding force in a person's life and can significantly impact one's individual and/or collective identity. Finally, the experience of humiliation can motivate behavioral responses that may serve to extend or re-define previously existing moral boundaries, leading individuals to perceive otherwise socially impermissible behavior to be permissible.*

The Social Construction of Emotions

While under many circumstances, humiliation may lead to aggressive behavior that perpetuates conflict, this is not necessarily always the case. For example, while Lindner (2002) notes that many individuals she interviewed who were involved in protracted conflicts in Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi reacted to humiliation with violence, she also describes how some well-known individuals, such as Nelson Mandela and Somalia's former first lady Edna Adan, refused to respond aggressively and also refused to feel humiliated at the hands of those who tried to humiliate them. Mandela ignored their taunts and did not allow himself to feel less worthy than his humiliators (Mandela, 1995), and Adan engaged others to support her in avoiding what was meant to be a humiliating situation.

What are the factors that lead people to respond to their humiliation violently versus not? There are numerous possible reasons for such differences; however, the focus of this paper is specifically on the influence of contextual or social norms on individuals'

emotional experiences and behavior. Studies on how emotions vary between cultures

(Frijda, 1986; Wong & Bond, 2004) depict them as influenced and constructed by social

and cultural messages and norms (Averill, 2001; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Harre, 1986;

Markus & Kitayama, 2001). Averill (1997) describes emotional experience as shaped by

rules and norms that define what certain emotions mean, whether they are good or bad,

and how people should respond to them. Thus, similar raw emotions may be constructed

and acted upon differently in dissimilar families, communities, and cultures.

Communities entrenched in an ongoing conflict may unwittingly encourage emotional

experiences and expressions of the most extreme nature, thereby escalating and

sustaining the conflict. Other communities might in fact discourage such extreme

responses to emotions, labeling them as superficial or passing, in an effort to maintain

community harmony.

     According to Averill (1997), emotional rules established by societal norms

correspond with a set of emotional roles that individuals take up when they

experience an emotion. These emotional roles can be described in three broad

categories: privileges, restrictions, and obligations. *Privileges* refers to the emotional

roles that allow a person to engage in behavior that would be discouraged under

normal circumstances. This is behavior that people can "get away with" as a result of

being in a certain emotional state. For example, an individual who is grieving for a

deceased family member may be entitled to miss work and be unresponsive to

voicemails and emails without facing the normal organizational penalties for doing so.

Restrictions refers to the limits placed on what a person can do when in an emotional

state and "get away with it." In this case, the norms of the culture limit individuals'

emotional responses by restricting how mild, strong, expressive, or drawn out the behavioral response should be. For instance, a person who is grieving for a deceased spouse may feel restricted from dating new people for a certain period of time. In contrast, *obligations* refers to the things that a person must do when in an emotional state (Averill, 1997). For example, at a funeral, a grieving spouse may feel obligated to wear black, speak in a soft tone, show signs of sadness, and greet other mourners.

Cultures of Honor

In fact, Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead & Fischer (2002) note that ethnographic record and social psychological research demonstrate that humiliations and insults do have differential effects in different cultures, and that they have an especially strong impact in cultures of honor (see Cohen & Nisbett, 1994, 1997; Cohen et. al., 1996; Cohen, Vandello & Rantilla, 1998; Miller, 1993; Murphy, 1983; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Peristiany, 1965; Pitt-Rivers, 1977; Stewart, 1994). Cultures of honor can be described as cultures in which even small disputes are contests for reputation and social status, and where individuals are well-prepared to protect their reputation by resorting to violence (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994, 1997; Cohen et.al., 1996; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Cultures of honor have arisen independently in many societies around the world, across vast expanses of geography and time. Such cultures tend to arise in societies where individuals' livelihood may be at risk of being stolen by others and where law enforcement is inadequate (such as in traditional herding communities). People therefore rely on their reputation for toughness in order to prevent the theft of property (such as herds) that can otherwise be easily stolen (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994, 1997; Cohen et.al., 1996; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). What is notable about cultures of honor is that they tend

to persist years, and even generations, after the economic and social conditions that gave rise to them are no longer in existence. For example, this has been found to be the case in the American South by Cohen and Nisbett (1994, 1997) and in Spain by Rodriguez Mosquera (1999), Murphy (1983), and Pitt-Rivers (1977).

Research has shown that those with high culture of honor values have been found to experience more negative emotions and become more aggressive in response to an insult than those with low culture of honor values (see Cohen & Nisbett, 1994, 1997; Cohen et. al., 1996; Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead & Fischer, 2002; Beersma, Harinck & Gerts, 2003). While a number of studies have suggested that culture of honor is correlated with higher levels of negative emotion and aggression, none of the studies has empirically investigated *why* this is the case. Cohen et. al. (1996) write that "the dynamics and specific mechanisms of the social enforcement of the culture of honor are important topics for future study" (p. 959). While they do not explore these mechanisms in detail, they do suggest that one reason why those with high culture of honor values might respond with a higher degree of negative emotions and aggression is because they "have different 'rules' for what to do once they are insulted" (p. 958). Following Averill's (1997) theory of emotional roles, we propose that culture of honor is correlated with a higher degree of negative emotions and aggression because individuals with high culture of honor values perceive and take up emotional roles that privilege aggressive responses in response to an insulting or humiliating encounter. The present studies empirically explore the following theoretical propositions:

1) Individuals with high culture of honor values will respond more aggressively to a humiliating encounter than will individuals with low culture of honor values.

2) Individuals with high culture of honor values will perceive a higher degree of privilege to aggress given a humiliating emotional experience, and will behave more aggressively than will individuals with low culture of honor values.

Emotional Memory and Rumination about Humiliating Experiences

It is not only the *experience* of emotions like humiliation, but also the *memory* of such emotions, that motivates aggressive behavior. Margalit (2002) writes, "[W]e can hardly remember insults without reliving them…The wounds of insult and humiliation keep bleeding long after the painful physical injuries have crusted over" (p.120). Social psychological research supports the validity of this statement. Highly emotional events, and particularly negative emotional events, are relatively well retained, both with respect to the emotional event itself as well as to central information in the event that elicits the emotional reaction (Christianson, 1984; Christianson & Loftus, 1987, 1990, 1991; Christianson, et. al., 1991; Yuille & Cutshall, 1986, 1989). A number of studies have found that the process of forgetting events is slowed when the events have an emotional component, versus when the events are neutral or non-emotional (Reisberg & Heuer, 1992; Christianson, 1984). Margalit (2002) asks,

> Why is remembering humiliation a reliving of it? Humiliation, I believe, is not just another experience in our life, like, say, an embarrassment. It is a formative experience. It forms the way we view ourselves as humiliated persons…[it] becomes constitutive of one sense of who we are" (2002, p. 130).

According to Singer and Blagov (2004) formative, or self-defining, memories share five characteristics. They are vivid, affectively intense, repetitively recalled, linked to other similar memories, and focused on an enduring concern or unresolved conflict. Self-defining memories have the power to affect individuals emotionally not only in the past when they first occurred, but also at the moment of recollection. Additionally, self-defining memories are thought to guide behavior as individuals strive to achieve unmet goals and act upon personal concerns. Thus, just as immediate emotional reactions influence behavior, emotional memories, especially those that are formative, or self-defining, influence behavior as well. If it is true that the memory of humiliation is akin to reliving it, and that feelings of humiliation can motivate aggressive action under the right conditions, then the memory of humiliation can perpetuate aggressive behavior.

Emotional memories that are self-defining are likely to be recalled repetitively (Singer & Blagov, 2004); in other words, self-defining emotional memories are likely to be ruminated about. Rumination is defined as self-focused attention, and refers to directing attention particularly on one's own negative mood (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). A series of empirical studies suggest that rumination increases the emotional experience of anger (e.g., Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998; Bushman, Pedersen, Vasquez, Bonacci & Miller, 2001; Bushman, 2002) as well as (intentions to engage in) aggressive behavior (e.g., Konecni, 1974; Bushman, 2002). In contrast to the catharsis theory (which states that expressing negative emotions diffuses them), these studies suggest that the more individuals ruminate, the angrier they feel and the more aggressively they behave.

Under what circumstances do people ruminate about their humiliation? We argue that people are more likely to ruminate about humiliating encounters when they gain some benefit from doing so. Individuals who perceive social norms to privilege aggression given a humiliating experience gain some benefit from ruminating about it. When individuals perceive social norms to privilege aggression given a humiliating experience, they ruminate about the humiliating experience because doing so provides them with constant motivation to retaliate, which can be pleasurable and feel morally justified (McCullough, et. al., 2001). For example, in studies involving Israeli and Palestinian participants, individuals were found to become attached to their "victim status" because such status allows them moral justification for their aggressive behavior (Nadler, 2002).

In summary, we offer the following hypotheses. These hypotheses are currently being tested in two empirical studies designed to explore the theoretical propositions outlined in this abstract.

Hypotheses:

a) Individuals who perceive emotional roles to privilege aggression will report more immediate and delayed negative affect (including feelings of humiliation and anger), intentions to aggress, and rumination than individuals who do not perceive emotional roles to privilege aggression.

b) Individuals with high culture of honor values will report a higher perception of social norms to privilege aggression than will individuals with low culture of honor values.

Methods

<u>Study 1</u>

Study 1 is a correlational survey study designed to test the above hypotheses. It has already been conducted and results are currently being analyzed.

Participants

The participants in this study are 96 individuals over the age of 18 who have access to the Internet. They are of varied ethnic backgrounds, speakers of English (either first or second language) and of varied socio-economic status. Following Cohen et. al. (1996), the participants are male.

Procedure

The study was conducted through an on-line survey that begins with a written scenario (following Cohen & Nisbett, 1994). Participants were asked to place themselves "in the shoes" of the main actor in the scenario and to imagine that the scenario was happening to them personally. In the scenario, the main actor (i.e., the participant) was humiliated by another actor. (The target of the humiliating event was the individual, and the event was directly humiliating towards the individual.)

After reading the scenario, participants answered a series of Likert-scale and open-ended questions to assess degree of perception of privilege to aggress given a humiliating experience, immediate affective reactions and intentions to aggress, as well as degree of culture of honor values. Background information (such as nationality, ethnicity, gender and age) was collected, and manipulation checks were conducted. One week later, delayed affective reactions, intentions to aggress, and rumination (following Caprara, 1986) were assessed using similar measures.

Results

Statistical analyses are currently being used to determine whether the data confirms the hypotheses. These analyses include correlations, t-tests, regressions, and analyses of variance (ANOVAs). Preliminary results support our main hypotheses.

Study 2

Study 2 is an experimental survey study with two experimental conditions (condition 1: emotional roles that privilege aggression; condition 2: emotional roles that do not privilege aggression) designed to test the above hypotheses. Data is currently being collected.

Participants

The participants in this study (n = 100) will be Americans over the age of 18 who have access to the Internet. They will be of varied ethnic backgrounds, speakers of English (either first or second language) and of varied socio-economic status. Following Cohen et. al. (1996), the participants will be male. There will be 50 participants in each of two experimental conditions.

Procedure

As in Study 1, this study is being conducted through an on-line survey that begins with a written scenario (following Cohen & Nisbett, 1994). Participants are asked to place themselves "in the shoes" of the main actor in the scenario and to imagine that the scenario was happening to them personally. In the scenario, the main actor (i.e., the participant) is humiliated by another actor. However, in study 2, the scenarios are experimentally manipulated to either raise the perception of privilege, or not raise the perception of privilege, to aggress. In condition 1, the scenario takes place at a college

fraternity party, an environment that tends to privilege aggression. In condition 2, the

scenario takes place at a book club party, an environment that does not tend to privilege

aggression.

After reading the scenario, participants answer a series of Likert-scale and open-

ended questions to assess immediate affective reactions and intentions to aggress, as well

as degree of culture of honor values. Background information (such as nationality,

ethnicity, gender and age) is being collected, and manipulation checks are being

conducted. One week later, delayed affective reactions, intentions to aggress, and

rumination (following Caprara, 1986) are being assessed using similar measures.

Results

Statistical analyses will be used to compare the data between the conditions to determine

whether the data confirms the hypotheses. These analyses include correlations, t-tests,

regressions, and analyses of variance (ANOVAs).

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